SERMON TITLE: “Catching on Fire”
SERMON TEXT: Acts 2:1-21
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: May 15, 2016 (Pentecost) at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

We’ve been hearing in the news about the terrible fire in Ft. McMurray, Alberta, Canada. Something like 88,000 people had to be evacuated from their homes and their jobs in the oil sands of that northern area. Because of minimal snowfall this past winter and an uncharacteristically warm and dry spring, the evergreen forests around Ft. McMurray have been ripe for wildfire. As of Tuesday, the flames had spread to 566,000 acres. The people of Alberta have called the fire a “beast” for the way it is consuming everything in its path. Fortunately, firefighters have been able to save the hospital and schools, and the community only lost about 2400 buildings. But it may still be weeks before the residents are allowed to return home, and a longer time before the oil boomtown returns to normal.

In cases like Ft. McMurray, we think of fire as a terrible danger to be avoided and suppressed. And fire certainly is a terrible thing when it involves the burning of homes and the loss of human and animal life; the loss of vast natural resources; and the pollution of the land, water, and air. Even a little fire in the wrong place at the wrong time can cause a great deal of trauma. But we also know that fire can be a very good thing. As wonderful as our Ogden climate is, we human beings would never be able to live here in the winter if it weren’t for fire. We need fire for warmth, for light, and for power. When we had that big windstorm a couple weeks ago, the electricity was off at my house for more than 24 hours. In the dark and cold of our house, Steve and I found some relief in the light of candles and the hand-lit flames on our gas range.

It’s that powerfully good and necessary image of fire that’s associated with the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. Today is the day of the church year when we remember and celebrate Christians catching on fire.
**1—FIRE ON THEIR HEADS**

Acts chapter 2 is the classic biblical story of Christians catching on fire. The twelve disciples and many other believers were gathered together in Jerusalem, waiting for the coming of the Holy Spirit. Just ten days before, Jesus had ascended to heaven, but he had promised them that the Holy Spirit would come upon them with power to be Jesus’ witnesses to the ends of the earth. So there they were, waiting and praying, when suddenly the sound of a violent wind filled the house where they were sitting. Verse three tells us that, as they were filled with the Holy Spirit, they saw what seemed to be tongues of fire resting on each of them.

Most often, artists have depicted the Pentecost phenomena with flames atop the disciples’ heads—kind of like lit candles on a birthday cake. Other pictures, like the one on the front of today’s bulletin, look more like lightning striking the disciples. That would make sense if there were, in fact, a violent, windy storm that day. Whatever it looked like, that first Pentecost was an amazing day. We don’t understand how, but somehow, the Holy Spirit gave the disciples the miraculous ability to speak in the native languages of all the tourists who were visiting Jerusalem for the Jewish festival. Through one-on-one witnessing and powerful preaching, the message of Jesus was communicated, and thousands of people came to believe. Before the day was over, the Christian church was born.

Heads on fire is a great image for Pentecost, even today. For a number of years, the United Methodist denomination has had a motto of “Open hearts, open minds, open doors.” That motto reminds us that we are a people whose brains are open and willing to learn new things. Our minds are not closed to God’s miraculous working in the world. Heads on fire means a willingness to speak in new languages to reach people who otherwise might not hear the good news message of Jesus. Whether that language is English, Spanish, American Sign Language, teenage slang, or computer high tech, God wants us to set our heads on fire with miraculous power so we can tell the story of Jesus. On Pentecost,
there weren’t any old dogs who couldn’t learn new tricks. The disciples were opening their minds to new possibilities. They were catching on fire in their heads.

2—FIRE IN OUR HEARTS

Catching our heads on fire isn’t always enough, though. Methodist founder John Wesley found that out the hard way. Wesley was born in England in 1703. His father was a priest in the Church of England, and John grew up in a very religious family. When he and his brother Charles were students at Oxford, they were so religious, in fact, that their fellow students made fun of them and called them derisive nicknames like “Sacramentarians,” “Enthusiasts,” and “Bible Moths.” Because of John and Charles’ methodical faithfulness to their religious disciplines, the name of mockery that finally stuck was “Methodists.”

After John Wesley graduated from Oxford, he was ordained as a Church of England priest and sent as a missionary across the Atlantic Ocean to the English colony of Georgia. Unfortunately, John’s two-part ministry to the English colonists and the Native Americans was not very successful. Despite his thorough knowledge of the Bible (in English, Latin, Hebrew, and Greek) and despite his own methodical efforts at religious piety, John felt like a failure. So Wesley went back home to London and worried about the state of his soul.

Fortunately, John had some friends who helped him out. Those people invited him to a Bible study at someone’s house on Aldersgate Street. There, on Aldersgate Street, John heard a new teaching. It really wasn’t new, but he heard it as if it were new. For the first time, John Wesley really understood that his salvation didn’t come through the diligence and success of his own efforts, but through the redeeming grace of God. For the first time, John knew in his heart that God’s love was for him, even him. That night, May 24, 1738, John wrote in his journal that he had felt his heart “strangely warmed.” This heart-warming experience changed John Wesley’s outlook and his ministry. Finally assured of his own salvation, Wesley charged ahead, established the Methodist movement, and became
one of the most successful ministers of all time. For John Wesley, catching on fire meant going beyond the knowledge and rules in his head and allowing God to set his heart on fire.

Hearts on fire is a good image for us today also. Like John Wesley, we sometimes get hung up on what we are supposed to know or do and we feel like spiritual failures. But the good news is that we don’t have to be prisoners to our sins and doubts. We don’t have to be captive to our fears and spiritual inadequacies. With hearts warmed by God’s grace, we know that the good news is not about us knowing and doing everything right. The good news is about Jesus who did everything perfectly on our behalf. The most important thing we can do now is allow ourselves to be loved. The miracle of Pentecost is catching on fire in our hearts.

3—Fire in Our Bellies

Fire in our heads gives us knowledge and skills for communication. Fire in our hearts assures us of our spiritual salvation. But one more thing is also needed. I call that “fire in our bellies”—and I don’t mean the kind you get after eating Mexican food. By fire in our bellies, I’m talking about how the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples at Pentecost and gave them the gifts of energy, courage, and determination.

Since Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion, the disciples had been afraid. Some of that fear had eased at Jesus’ resurrection. Now, 50 days later, they were feeling a little more confident. But still, what would happen when they spoke out and drew attention to themselves? Would the Jewish leaders arrest them? Would the disciples soon be hanging on a cross too?

Actually, the answer was “Yes.” They would get in trouble. Tradition has it that many of the believers eventually became martyrs for their faith. But, through the power of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, the disciples came to a courage and determination that overcame their fears. They spoke out with such enthusiasm and vigor that they were accused of being drunk. But that accusation didn’t stop them. They had a message to proclaim. They had a divine imperative, like an infusion of
primal instinct, that drove them forward against all odds. The Holy Spirit had given the disciples a fire in their bellies.

This Pentecost miracle always makes me wonder, how is God putting fire in our bellies today? Where are we receiving and practicing courage? This week, I’ve been reading about and live-streaming some of the deliberations of our United Methodist General Conference. That quadrennial meeting, which goes through May 20, involves United Methodists from all over the world. With their many languages and cultures, and the diversity of music in the worship services, you’d think it was the Day of Pentecost. There are times in the debates when it seems to me that some delegates are taking very courageous stands for what they believe the church needs to do and be in our world. Despite opposition, some United Methodists are stepping into dangerous places, risking their roles, reputations, and livelihood to speak out on issues they believe will open up new ministry opportunities to more people. On this Day of Pentecost, I pray that God will put more fire in our bellies.

CONCLUSION

Most of you are familiar with Suzanne Collins' *Hunger Games* books or the movies that were made from them. So, you might recall that, in the first book and movie, District 12 tributes Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark entered the Capital City in a chariot and wearing flaming clothes. Afterward, when Katniss was interviewed on national TV, the host called her “the girl on fire.” The second book and movie of the series was titled “Catching Fire.” In that second installment, the flaming courage of Katniss and Peeta sparked a rebellion in District 13, which, by the end of book three and movie four, led to the overthrow of the corrupt government of Panem.

Sometimes God gives us a necessary flame and it has the contagious power to spread and make a huge difference. That’s what happened on the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples and then spread to the people gathered in Jerusalem and through their many languages out to the cultures and nations of the Mediterranean world. The church was born, and the gospel of Jesus was
proclaimed. Now, as then, the Holy Spirit is ready to set our heads, our hearts, and our bellies aflame, so that the message of Christ can spread and grow. I invite you today. Open yourself up. If we are willing to receive the miraculous power of God’s Holy Spirit, we can be sure of catching on fire.